

## **Look for the helpers. We are the helpers!**

By Crispin Ketelhut Montelione

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The world feels like a scary place right now.

We are in the midst of a world-wide pandemic that is affecting each one of us in some way. The majority of us are currently physically restricted, many are quarantined, and some of us are experiencing losses of loved ones. Almost all of us are reacting in ways that show we are afraid and justifiably worried—even those of us who are seasoned against what life can throw our way.

A simple definition of a “pandemic” is “an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population” (Merriam-Webster). The word *pandemic* is typically reserved for situations involving infectious disease or sickness.

There is also another type of “pandemic” that befalls, and threatens, an extremely high proportion of our worldwide population: child sexual abuse. In fact, in 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) [declared](#)<sup>1</sup> that child sexual abuse was a major global health concern. More than 40 million people are living with a history of child sexual abuse. It happens in every environment imaginable, and especially behind closed doors and unmonitored environments. It is done by people we love and trust. Little ones are forced to become survivors at the youngest of ages because of the action, and inaction, of others. It’s a worldwide pandemic that affects everyone, and children most of all—and it isn’t fair for them.

During safe environment sessions where participants learn more about the reality of child sexual abuse, the facilitator asks the group about their reactions. Besides anger, the most common response is typically “fear” or “worry.” These are normal reactions, and understandable. But, why is it, overwhelmingly, that *adults* respond to the subject of child sexual abuse with fear?

We react with fear, with anxiety, with worry—all because we sometimes feel helpless when confronted with this subject. During the training, we quickly page through a mental rolodex of all the situations in our lives involving children, our own or others’, thinking back to those moments that made us feel like something was off, or when alarms were raised. And then, we begin to fear our judgment, and that an abuser could be anyone, that we don’t know whom to look for, how to stop abuse from continuing, how to evaluate whether it’s already happening to the children in our care—the list can be extensive, and exhausting—even paralyzing.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. *Responding to children and Adolescents Who Have Been Sexually Abused - WHO Clinical Guidelines*. 2017. Retrieved March 2020 from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259270/9789241550147-eng.pdf>

In 1986, television host Fred Rogers (commonly known now as “Mr. Rogers,” from the Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood show for preschoolers) wrote the following in a newspaper [article](#)<sup>2</sup>.

I was spared from any great disasters when I was little, but there was plenty of news of them in newspapers and on the radio, and there were graphic images of them in newsreels. For me, as for all children, the world could have come to seem a scary place to live. [...] There was something else my mother did that I’ve always remembered: **“Always look for the helpers,”** she’d tell me. **“There’s always someone who is trying to help.”** I did, and I came to see that the world is full of doctors and nurses, police and firemen, volunteers, neighbors and friends who are ready to jump in to help when things go wrong.

“Always look for the helpers... There’s always someone who is trying to help.” This is a phrase that understandably goes “viral” on social media after tragic events. The devastating effects of child sexual abuse can be just as traumatic as natural disasters, as sickness, as worldwide pandemics. Similarly, they can leave deep marks that can last for years, especially if youth do not receive the help they need—help they don’t know how to obtain. Help that isn’t attainable to them because they aren’t willing, or able, to talk about what happened. Or, maybe they don’t have someone safe with whom they can share.

It’s a beautiful phrase for you and me to reflect on—because we are, in fact, the helpers! Helpers are safe adults, trusted persons—ones who would never hurt youth without a good reason (like removing a splinter or giving a shot to prevent an infection) and who would never intentionally confuse the child. They are caring adults who identify that the safety of youth is paramount. Helpers are the ones whom children and teens are counting on to help, to be responsible for their safety. Whom survivors wish they had to advocate for them in their childhoods. It’s our job, our moral responsibility and possibly even our legal one, regardless of our role in their lives—whether we are a volunteer in a ministry that involves them, or their teacher, a coach, a mentor, a grandparent, or their parent.

The reality is, it’s good that you were at that safe environment session. It’s a blessing you’re here, now. Because, research has shown that you can stop abuse from continuing, and from even happening in the first place. There are tangible action items that we can do, individually and collectively to curb this pandemic of child sexual abuse.

You never know at what point a child might need someone to help them. A helper that does more than opens the door for them (but opens the door to a

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers; The Orlando Sentinel. *Having people close can calm child’s fears*. Retrieved March 2020 from: <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1986-06-25-8606280009-story.html>

bigger issue). A person who listens to the youth, believes them and attains any needed help.

You may be in closer quarters with youth than you are used to during these times of restricted social movement, which gives you an opportunity to help them in ways that might not normally be on your radar: have those conversations with youth about their safety, listen to what they say—and what they don't, believe them. Pay attention to their body language and signs of distress. Be aware of what they're posting online, and of your own behavior that you're modeling on the Internet. If the children and teens in your care are exhibiting red flags, it might not be that they're being sexually abused, but they could be anxious and need reassurance from something else that might be amiss—perhaps regarding the other pandemic we are experiencing. If they need more help than you can provide, consider giving them the resource of online counseling or therapy, which is an alternative for people who are unable to go to an actual office.

As scary as abuse is for adults to confront and work through, it's scarier for our youth. Their plea, whether vocalized or not, is for help. Show the youth of today, through whatever means possible, that we are willing to help the most vulnerable. As adults, we don't just "look for the helpers." We handle all types of pandemics in virtually the same way. Recognize the problem, identify potential solutions, reflect on how we each personally can contribute, and work together as a community. Be the helper. We ARE the helpers.